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CIA to 'analyze' spy case story for damage to national security

By Ed Rogers
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

White House spokesman Larry Speakes yesterday said a Washington Post story about the espionage case against Ronald W. Pelton was being "analyzed by the CIA to see if they have any specific problems with it."

CIA Director William Casey had threatened prosecution if the story contained information damaging to national security. During meetings with Post editors, Mr. Casey requested that classified information be withheld. Later President Reagan pressed the request in a telephone call to Katharine Graham, board chairman of The Washington Post Co.

Mr. Pelton is on trial in Baltimore on charges of selling to Soviet KGB agents technical information about intelligence U.S. submarines can pick up at Soviet ports. Mr. Casey had expressed concern that the Post story would reveal details of U.S. intelligence capabilities.

Asked by the Associated Press whether The Post had deleted all the material requested by the administration, Executive Editor Benjamin C. Bradlee said: "I am sure we did not. We deleted what we felt appropriate after discussion."

The Post story quoted Mr. Bradlee as saying he did not believe the Soviets would learn anything new from the material withheld, but the editors decided not to publish it because they were unable to evaluate the "national security objections of senior officials" and because of concerns by Post lawyers.

Media representatives were divided on how the incident should have been handled.

"I certainly think that Mr. Casey achieved the end that he wanted, which was censorship, and he did it without having to go to court to testify," said Michael Gartner, president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

"It's chilling," Mr. Gartner said in an interview.

But Barnard Yoh, communications director of Accuracy in Media, said the fact that the Post editors decided to comply only after deliberation demonstrates the "arrogance" of the press today.

"When the director of the CIA asks this out of national security importance, you should be able to take his word for it," Mr. Yoh said. "When the president calls, you should be able to take it at face value."

Mr. Yoh said the administration official who leaked the classified information to The Post "should be investigated, should be caught, should be punished severely."

Reached by telephone, Robert Kendall, a respected columnist who is board chairman of Reporter Times Inc. and editor of its Daily Reporter in Martinsville, Ind., said: "I think the person who made it possible for them [the Post editors] to have this information, if it is critical, ought to be shot."

The problem is that too much information is classified and none of the classified information is properly protected, Mr. Kendall said.

"There ought to be some way to cut the classifications way down, I mean really way down, and then those secrets ought to be protected — literaly, I'm talking life and death," Mr. Kendall said.

"When they overuse it [classification], that's about as counterproductive as not classifying at all," he said. "They [editors] say nothing is worth keeping. Then there are these guys who would give anything they can away to the Reds. I know that."

During a panel discussion of issues raised by the Post decision, Jane Kirtley, executive director of the Reporters' Committee for Freedom of the Press, said: "What you've got is a threat — maybe an idle threat, maybe a serious threat. But you've got a threat that seems to be effective in the sense that it's acting as a prior restraint on the media."

Ms. Kirtley disagreed with George Carver, a former CIA official and panel member, who said any discussion of communications intelligence "either does actual damage or runs such a high risk of damage that it's got to be stopped."

"I would certainly not want to publish or air anything that would cause the loss of life in a covert operation or a catastrophic setback in American intelligence," John Huddy, a CBS News executive, said.

William Casey

"At the same time," he said, "history has been such that you never know when you're being victimized, that maybe this is the first step in a move by this or any other administration to shut down the press."

Jerry W. Friedheim, executive vice president of the American Newspaper Publishers Association, expressed a milder view.

"These decisions are always difficult," he told The Washington Times. "It is usually appropriate that editors consult with the government about such matters, and it is also appropriate that the ultimate decison about publication should be made by the editors and their newspapers."

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